

On the Readiness of Social Work Students to Blow the Whistle to Protect the Client's Interests

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss the relationship between social work and whistleblowing. Our claim is that in spite of whistleblowing being an important dilemma for social workers because it puts to a test the commitment to promote and protect the welfare of their clients, there is little research done on the subject. The paper presents a study to examine the self-reported readiness of undergraduate and graduate students of social work to blow the whistle in protection of their clients' interests.

Key words: whistleblowing, ethical dilemma, social work students, client's interest.

Introduction

Whistleblowing is the disclosure by a person, working within an organization, of facts, omissions, practices, or policies by that organization or by their employees that wrong or harm a third party. The objective of the disclosure is to stop the harmful behavior and to prevent such conduct in the future. The revelation can be made to superiors within the employing organization or to authorities outside the organization who are in a position to help, such as journalists, the police, or a regulatory agency with oversight responsibility (James, 1980; Miceli *et al.*, 1991).

Whistleblowing is a complex dilemma with implications for professional performance. Employees who are aware of an act of wrongdoing carried out by the organization that employs them or by other employees must choose between the public benefit and their allegiance to their employer. If they do decide to disclose the act that caused the injustice or damage, they will be acting in the best interest of the public and against their place of work and their colleagues. In such cases, whistleblowers put themselves at risk because they are likely to clash with colleagues or superiors and might even jeopardize their jobs. For social workers, whistleblowing presents an even greater dilemma since the third party involved is usually the social worker's client. This

means that if social workers decide to do nothing to stop a colleague's or a supervisor's harmful conduct, they may be violating their basic professional commitment to promote and protect the welfare of their clients and, in fact, undermining the very *raison d'être* of the profession.

The complexity of the dilemma of whistleblowing in social work might be one of the reasons why so little research has been done on the issue. In other professions and in the organizational field, hundreds of studies have been published during the last 20 years (De Maria, 1993). To our knowledge, only three papers on whistleblowing and social work have been published in peer-reviewed journals. De Maria (1996) has examined the plight of Australian welfare professionals who made public interest disclosures. Mansbach and Kaufman (2003) have presented a case study of the Israeli Association of Social Workers' treatment of a social worker who reported his colleagues' unprofessional conduct to the media. Greene and Latting (2004) have argued that whistleblowing is a form of advocacy and offered guidelines for social workers and organizations.

The complexity of the dilemma for social workers might also explain why we find such various and contradictory opinions among the few researchers who have studied this subject. Reamer and Siegel (1992) present opposing views on the desirability of reporting an incompetent colleague, with Reamer, who favored reporting, emphasizing that the worker's unprofessional conduct jeopardized her clients, and Siegel, who opposed reporting, contending that blowing the whistle jeopardized the agency and the good work it was doing in the community. In contrast, although De Maria (1996) recognizes the difficulties inherent in whistleblowing, he stresses the need for social workers and welfare workers to take such action because of its social importance. Greene and Latting (2004) view the subject in an entirely different way: they claim that whistleblowing must be considered as an important professional tool for social workers, a special form of advocacy that is necessary to protect the rights of their clients.

The paucity of studies on whistleblowing in social work does not stem from the absence of abuses that might warrant reporting. Social workers, like the employees in any other field, sometimes witness harmful acts, omissions, practices, or policies by their employer or colleagues. The case of Allison Taylor, a social worker who disclosed the long-term and sustained sexual, physical, and emotional abuse of children in shelters in Wales, is a good example (Taylor, 1998). Although cases are generally of a much smaller scale than that disclosed by Taylor, they are no

less serious in terms of their ethical and/or professional ramifications. Given both the importance of the issue and its many complexities, the lack of research in this area is a serious omission.

The present study makes a modest effort to begin to fill in the gaps. More specifically, it examines the readiness of undergraduate and graduate social work students to blow the whistle, whether internally or externally. Internal disclosure entails reporting the wrongdoing to an authority within the organization. External disclosure entails reporting the offense to an outside agency, such as the police, professional organization, or the press. In most cases, whistleblowing is a two-step process. Whistleblowers generally report that it was only after their internal disclosure failed to put a stop to the wrongdoing that they decided to disclose the behavior to an external authority (Benson & Ross 1998; Dworkin & Baucus, 1998).

Method

Sample

The convenience sample was comprised of 162 participants divided into two groups: 45 graduate and 117 undergraduate students of the Department of social work at Ben Gurion University, Beer-Sheva, Israel. The important distinction between the two groups is that they differ in terms of their professional experience in the field. The Ben-Gurion University graduate program (MSW) requires candidates to hold a BSW degree, as well as several years of work experience in the profession.

No statistically significant differences were found between the two groups regarding the demographic characteristics of gender ($\chi^2=0.1$, $df=1$, NS) and country of origin ($\chi^2=5.4$, $df=2$, NS). However, statistically significant differences were found with regard to age and marital status: Subjects in the graduate students' group were older than the subjects in the undergraduate students' group ($M=33.82$, $SD=6.8$ vs. $M=24.55$, $SD=3.2$; $t=8.7$, $p<0.001$), and a higher percentage of them were married ($\chi^2=47.50$, $df=1$, $p<0.001$).

Procedure

A questionnaire was administered to students in class. The undergraduate students completed the questionnaire at the start of their first class in a required course on professional ethics. The graduate students completed the questionnaire in a required course on social policy. The distribution and presentation of the questionnaire was identical for all respondents and was done by an experienced research assistant. The prospective respondents were informed that the

questionnaire was part of a survey on ethics, and that the gathered data would be used for research purposes only. Before they received the questionnaire, the respondents were explicitly told that their participation was voluntary and anonymous, and that it was not part of the course requirements. After the students filled out the questionnaires, they were collected by the research assistant, who put them into a sealed envelope and delivered them to the researcher. The administration of the questionnaire lasted for about 15 to 20 minutes. The response rate was very high (94%).

Measures

The questionnaire was comprised of multiple-choice questions regarding socio-demographic details and two vignettes describing ethical dilemmas that were likely to arise in the workplace. The socio-demographic questionnaire included questions about gender, age, marital status, country of origin, and years of professional experience in social work. The marital status variable was recoded according to a distinction between those who were married and those who were not (single, divorced, and widowed). Professional work experience was also recoded according to those with experience and those without experience. A pilot study was undertaken in which six undergraduate and five graduate students not included in the study completed the questionnaire. Based on their comments, minimal changes were made to some of the questions.

Case Stories

The questionnaire presented two vignettes describing situations in which social workers were required to make a decision that involved whistleblowing. One vignette described an ethical dilemma in which the social worker had to choose between responsibility to the client and loyalty to a colleague. The other vignette presented a dilemma in which the social worker had to choose between responsibility to the client and loyalty to management.

The case stories were designed to replicate specific characteristics seen in acts of whistleblowing. Most accounts of whistleblowing reveal similar procedures. In general, the act of whistleblowing is done gradually. First there is an internal disclosure, i.e., the whistleblower approaches his or her superior or another individual who is higher up in the organization's hierarchy in order to put an end to the wrongdoing or practice that is detrimental to the public or a third party. This procedure is recommended on both ethical and strategic grounds by scholars and by organizations that try to protect and encourage whistleblowers. An internal disclosure is likely

to put an end to the misconduct and, as such, to prevent an external disclosure, which may be detrimental to the organization. In addition to allowing the whistleblower to demonstrate his or her loyalty, an internal disclosure also provides him or her with moral justification for approaching an external party should all internal channels prove unsuccessful (Dworkin & Baucus, 1998).

The case stories were presented to ten students (five from each group) to receive their preliminary input. Their responses were used to finalize the questionnaire. Each story contained five questions: Question 1 asked the respondent to rate the gravity of the misconduct, Questions 2 and 3 dealt with internal whistleblowing, and Questions 4 and 5 with external whistleblowing. The first question was rated on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 7 (very serious). The answers to the other questions were rated on a scale of 1 (not likely) to 4 (very likely). In order to examine the difference between the two types of whistleblowing, Questions 2 and 3 were summed into one index, which represented internal whistleblowing, and Questions 4 and 5 into another index representing external whistleblowing. The two vignettes were presented as follows:

Vignette 1: First Dilemma – Protecting the Client’s Interests vs. Being Loyal to a Colleague.

You are a social worker in a geriatric center. A colleague submitted an application for a supervisor’s job and was chosen for the position. You know that the job requires either an MSW or several years of relevant work experience. You also know that the colleague used a forged degree to get the job and that he does not have the necessary managerial experience, a fact that could harm those cared for by the geriatric center.

- How serious do you consider your colleague’s behavior?
- How likely is it that you will talk to your colleague and try to persuade him to admit his true level of training and his lack of relevant experience to his superiors?
- If you decide not to talk to your colleague, or if you have talked to him about the matter and not succeeded in getting him to admit to his lack of credentials, how likely is it that you will go to someone at the center who has the power to intervene, such as the personnel manager or the center's director?
- If you decide not to approach anyone at the center, or if you do and he or she does nothing to intervene, how likely is it that you will turn to the Social Workers Association, an external body?
- If you decide not to talk to the Social Workers Association, or if you do talk to them and they do nothing, how likely is it that you will report the matter to the media?

The internal reliability of the questionnaire (Questions 2-5) was high ($\alpha=0.80$). The Rho Spearman correlations were ($r_s = 0.63$, $r_s = 0.59$) for the two questions measuring internal whistleblowing and for the two questions measuring external whistleblowing, respectively.

Vignette 2: Second Dilemma – Protecting the Client’s Interests vs. Being Loyal to Management

You are a social worker in the children’s section of a center for victims of violence. It has recently come to your attention that the director of the section intends to use money budgeted for buying equipment for a play corner to buy luxury fittings for her own office.

- 1) How grave do you rate the director’s behavior?
- 2) How likely is it that you will try to persuade the director not to use the money for her own office but to set up the play corner?
 - If you decide not to talk to the director, or if you have talked to her and not been able to change her mind, how likely is that you will report the director's intentions to someone at the center who has the power to intervene, such as the center’s director or the finance manager?
 - If you do not refer the matter to an authority at the center, or if you do and he or she does not intervene in the section director’s decision, how likely is it that you will turn to the Social Workers Association, an external authority?
 - If you decide not to report the matter to the Social Workers Association, or if you do talk to them and they do nothing, how likely is it that you will report the matter to the media?

The internal reliability of the questionnaire (Questions 2-5) was moderate to high ($\alpha=0.78$). The Rho Spearman correlations were ($r_s = 0.59$, $r_s = 0.57$) for the two questions measuring internal whistleblowing and for the two questions measuring external whistleblowing, respectively.

Results

Significant differences between the two student groups were found for the socio-demographic variables of age and marital status. Therefore, these variables as well as the variable of professional experience (inexperienced students/experienced students) were submitted to regression analysis in order to establish each variable’s unique contribution to the variance of the assessed indices. Regression analysis was conducted with regard to the explanation of the perceived severity of the behavior and the internal and external whistleblowing indices in both case stories (Tables 1 and 2). For each of the indices examined (with the exception of the first in each case story), experience was found to be statistically significant. In other words, for both vignettes, the students with no professional experience had a greater tendency toward internal and external whistleblowing in order to change the situation in comparison with the students with

professional experience. It should be noted that age and/or marital status were found to be statistically significant for some of the indices. Age, for example, was found to be a significant predictor for external whistleblowing in the dilemma involving a manager at work. However, in each of the cases, the relative contribution of experience was found to be larger than the

Table 1

Linear Regression: Predictors for the explanation of the severity of the behavior and the indices of internal and external whistle blowing – Ethical dilemma involving a colleague

	Experience ^[1]	Age	Marital Status ^[2]
	β	β	β
How grave do you consider your colleague's behavior?	0.08	0.09	0.11
Internal whistle blowing index: The likelihood that you will talk to your colleague and/or approach an authority figure at the center	0.41**	0.22	-0.07
External whistle blowing index: The likelihood that you will approach an external party, such as the Social Workers' Union and/or the press.	0.40**	0.22	0.01

**p<0.01

[1] 0 = graduate students with professional experience 1 = undergraduate students with no professional experience

[2] 0 = married 1 = not married

contribution of other variables, such as age and marital status. In other words, experience made a statistically significant and unique contribution to the explanation of the indices assessed in both vignettes and, in cases where age and/or marital status were also found to be significant, experience made the greatest contribution to the explained variance. A comparison of the average scores of the internal and external whistleblowing indices for the two student groups in both vignettes is

presented in Table 3. In both groups, the average score of the internal index was higher than the average score of the external index and the difference was statistically significant. In other words, in both groups, for both vignettes, the likelihood of approaching parties within the organization was higher than the likelihood of approaching those external to the organization.

Table 3
Linear Regression: Predictors for the explanation of the severity of the behavior and the internal and external whistle blowing indices – Ethical dilemma involving a manager at work

	Experience ^(A)	Age	Marital Status ^(B)
	β	β	β
How grave do you rate the director's behavior?	0.18	-0.06	0.09
Internal whistle blowing index: The likelihood that you will talk to the manager and/or approach an authority figure at the center	0.33**	0.16	-0.22*
External whistle blowing index: The likelihood that you will approach an external party, such as the Social Workers' Union and/or the press	0.39**	0.25*	-0.16

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

^(A) 0 = graduate students with professional experience / or undergraduate students with no professional experience

^(B) 0 = married, 1 = not married

The findings of the two dilemmas were very similar. The students with no professional experience had a greater tendency to act in order to change the situation in comparison with the students with professional experience. In terms of taking steps (internal or external) to change the situation, both groups showed a greater tendency to approach individuals within the organization than those outside of it.

Discussion

The main limitations of this study are that it examines expectations rather than actions and that it does not query the respondents' considerations or reasons for disclosing at the different levels. Another limitation is that neither of the wrongdoings described in the vignettes caused immediate physical harm to the clients. It cannot be ruled out that the study respondents would

have been more likely to blow the whistle on such acts, even externally. In addition, the fact that the study was carried out in Israel raises questions about the generalizability of the findings to other countries.

Table 3
A comparison between the indices of internal and external whistle blowing for experienced and inexperienced students groups, in both vignettes

	Graduate students with professional experience (n=45)		Undergraduate students with no professional experience (n=117)	
	Mean SD	t value df p	Mean SD	t value df p
Vignette 1: Ethical dilemma with a colleague				
Internal whistle blowing index	5.56 (1.60)	t=7.06 df=44 p<0.001	6.53 (1.22)	t=12.07 df=116 p<0.001
External whistle blowing index	3.98 (1.82)		4.98 (1.69)	
Vignette 2: Ethical dilemma with management				
Internal whistle blowing index	5.84 (1.43)	t=7.85 df=44 p<0.001	6.91 (1.30)	t=10.71 df=116 p<0.001
External whistle blowing index	3.96 (1.73)		5.21 (1.88)	

Taking this into account, the study's findings show that both the undergraduate students and the graduate students with professional experience regarded the two acts – the colleague's use of a forged document to obtain a promotion and the middle-manager's diversion of earmarked funds for her own benefit – as being very serious. They also reveal that both groups were likely to act. Both groups, however, also reported a considerably greater likelihood of blowing the whistle internally than externally. In fact, both groups reported a decreasing likelihood of acting as this action moved from talking to the offender to reporting the offense to an authority in the agency, reporting it to the Social Workers Association, and, finally, to reporting it to the press. The pattern is the same and the means quite similar for both vignettes.

Because this was designed as a preliminary study, the respondents were not asked for their reasons or considerations. The pattern seems to show, however, a desire to correct the wrongdoing
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(evident in the reporting of a high likelihood of acting) along with a progressive retraction as the circle of disclosure widened. This retraction may stem from two different concerns. On the one hand, it may reflect the respondents' awareness of the increasingly serious nature of each level of protest or disclosure. Accounts in the literature clearly indicate that the price paid by the whistleblower is higher when the wrongdoing is reported externally rather than internally (Biklen, 1983; Dworkin & Baucus, 1998). On the other, it may reflect the respondents' concerns that external exposure could have negative consequences not only for the wrongdoer, but also for the agency and for the individuals who receive its services (Alford, 2001).

The findings also show that the graduate students and practicing social workers were less likely to blow the whistle, be it internally or externally, than undergraduate social work students with no professional experience. Moreover, this difference remains—or even increases—concomitantly with the level of activity required to stop the misconduct. These findings are consistent with other studies, where undergraduate social work students display a stronger expectation of contributing to, influencing, and altering society through the profession than practicing social workers (Dhooper et. al., 1990; Cohen & Cohen, 1998; Lev-Wiesel, 2003). They may reflect the practicing social worker's greater awareness of the price to be paid for disclosure, the greater vulnerability that comes with age and personal commitments (e.g., to support families), and/or his or her greater awareness of the complexities of whistleblowing, including the possibilities that it will not be effective and that it may harm innocent persons.

This study and its findings about social work students and their willingness to blow the whistle constitute a first step, one, we hope, that will be used as such for further studies. One objective of such research would be to examine the reasons why social workers decide not to blow the whistle. Do they stem from an individual's socialization within the profession, burnout, desire to avoid confrontations in the workplace, or fear of being fired? A crucial objective would be to understand why the principle of the client's best interest—a central ethical and professional principle designed to all guide social workers—is disregarded when a colleague or senior official in the organization is involved in improper conduct.

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